

**Christmas Eve
December 24, 2021**

**In the name of the God of all Creation
... the One who brought us into being
The God alive in each of us
... as God was alive in Jesus
And the power of God known in the Spirit
... the Spirit who blessed Mary with God's Son.
Amen.**

What a glorious Christmas Eve! Music that fills the soul with delight ... this church decorated beautifully with greens ... and an evening filled with spirit, hope and love.

Two thousand years ago the night was filled with spirit and hope. That spirit and hope of two thousand years ago is the origin of the spirit and hope we are experiencing this evening. However, two thousand years ago the evening was filled with spirit, but that was about all ... other than sheer darkness. The world into which Jesus was born was filled with darkness ... a literal darkness that the shepherds in the fields knew well. But it was also a darkness of political and military oppression, economic hardship, and even a darkness in the Temple ... supposedly the abode of God.

The Gospel of Luke begins by setting the stage for Jesus birth, telling of a world that is waiting and hoping for God's anointed one to arrive. In the first chapter of Luke, Zechariah speaks of that hope and what the coming Messiah will mean:

"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:78-79).

These were the words of a prophesy of an event two thousand years ago. However, we need to hear them speaking to us now ... tonight. God's incarnated presence in this hurting world brings us to the dawn of a new day ... a new day when darkness will be interrupted by light ... when bigotry and hatred will be interrupted by love ... when selfish narcissism will be interrupted by self-less acts of sacrifice for the common good.

The light and life that is Jesus ... the LOVE Jesus brought into this world ... brings us to a new way of being and seeing ... to this way of peace that Zechariah prophesies. And, that light and life and LOVE is also available to us ... tonight.

The God that was alive in Jesus can also be alive in each one of us. God showed us what LOVE could do to the world in the human being named Jesus, and that same LOVE that came alive in Jesus can come alive in each one of us.

That LOVE tells us that we are blessed children of God, and that we can be a part of God's LOVE for the world every time we share that love ... especially with those that may feel less than loved by those around them. This is our participation in the mystery of incarnation. This is a path of possibility ... this is the way of hope.

Now ... for just a moment ... imagine the chaos in Bethlehem during this census that Luke tells us about. All who traced their heritage to the city of David were required to return to be counted, and I can only imagine how this event must have been overwhelming to residents and visitors alike ... including Mary and Joseph.

We can only wonder what might this have been like for Mary and Joseph. They were in Bethlehem to be counted ... counted so they could be taxed by the Roman government. Yet I imagine that in everyone else's eyes they didn't count for much at all. Without any money ... and not connected to anyone with any influence ... they ended up giving birth to a baby in a stable because there was no room for the marginalized in the inn.

And we hear about some shepherds taking care of their flock of sheep. These shepherds were startled from the half-sleep of the night-watch and saw and heard angelic messengers give them some very strange news. The savior of the world ... the Messiah ... the anointed ... expected one ... the one that was their hope ... was finally alive in the realm of humanity. The angels proclaimed that the Messiah was finally here ... not in might and maturity ... not in power and wealth ... but in the form of a vulnerable baby ... and found in a feed trough of a cattle stall no less ... a feed trough of a cattle stall in a backwater village named Bethlehem

So the shepherds wandered to a barn outside of the small town. After some searching they found two frightened teenagers and a baby in the cattle stall of a small barn just like the angel said. If that part of the angel's story was true then maybe the rest of what the angel said was also true. The shepherds knew that the possibility of all they had been hoping for ... dreaming for ... just might be lying there ... a baby in a feeding trough, asleep.

When the shepherds left, they could not contain themselves. Luke says they told everyone in sight ... glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard. These simple working men were caught up in the possibility and the holy hope of newness, liberation, and peace that was all bound up in this child ... and they had to tell everybody. I can just imagine the speculation ...

Maybe this baby will grow up and will be the answer to our hope. Maybe things will change in this desperate situation. Maybe our people will no longer be under the oppression of the Caesar. Maybe these lawmakers of the temple will finally have someone challenge them. Maybe he will spend his life with people like us ... poor ... uneducated ... marginalized ... the sinners and the outcasts. Maybe people will be healed. Maybe the hungry will be fed. Maybe ... just maybe ... God has entered into this world in the form of a powerless infant. Maybe ... Maybe ... Maybe ...

We all know the stories of what this child did and said when he grew up. Those “maybe’s” became “truly, truly, I say unto you” as he taught the crowds and challenged the religious leaders. Possibility and holy hope became reality as he healed the sick, calm storms, helped the blind to see, and fed the multitudes with simple loaves and fish.

Two thousand years later, we are still people who claim this infant Jesus as the beginning of our story. By claiming this birth story, we name ourselves as the people of possibility and hope ... holy hope.

By claiming the birth story of Jesus as our story, we claim that there still exists a possibility for understanding, a possibility for peace and reconciliation, a possibility that today, or maybe tomorrow, good news will triumph and that change will happen ... even in the midst of darkness.

When we don’t want to watch the morning news ... or when confronted with yet another COVID-19 variant ... or the latest school shooting death toll ...or when faced with another political stalemate that feels more like a game than governing ... there is still possibility and hope that LOVE will triumph.

When angry with the people around us ... our neighbor ... our siblings, or parents, or children ... our even our wife, or husband, or partner ... it is in that darkness that we claim that there still exists a possibility for understanding, a possibility for peace and reconciliation, a possibility that today, or maybe tomorrow, good news will triumph and that change will happen. That is the holy hope that we celebrate tonight.

When we see some of this darkness, violence, and apathy inside of ourselves, and when we do battle with our responsibilities in this world, we claim that a possibility and hope still exists for renewal in our own life ... for hope and light and LOVE to enter into our own hearts and souls. We can claim that there is a possibility and hope that we can know we are blessed children of a loving God ... and therefore show love to others and share that hope. There exists a possibility and hope all around us ... and within each of us ... for incarnation to occur. The mystery and the glory of incarnation ... of God coming alive in us as God came alive in Jesus ... as proclaimed by Zechariah and the shepherds ... that mystery and glory is that we will always confront it in the region of the unexpected.

In the story of Jesus’ birth, as well as in his life, death, and resurrection, we see that maybe things will be radically different than we have experienced thus far. We encounter the unexpected ... we encounter “maybe” ... we encounter possibility ... we encounter hope ... we encounter LOVE in the flesh.

Maybe people will be healed. Maybe the poor will be fed. Maybe all will be treated and loved as equals. Maybe peace will reign and wars will cease. This is the language of possibility ... this is the language of hope ... this is the language of LOVE.

Maybe Word will become flesh. Maybe God will become human, just like us. This is the language of incarnation.

Maybe God will be revealed in the homeless man ... or the woman selling her body to stay alive ... or the neighbor down the street ... or the estranged daughter or son. Maybe God will be found in the former friend you wrote off years ago. This is the language of the unexpected. This is the language of optimistic possibility ... the language of radical hope ... and faith in the God who brought us into being and came alive in Jesus. This is what LOVE looks like.

In the midst of everything happening in this world, people of faith like us still claim possibility and holy hope. We still claim incarnation, resurrection, and the unexpected. We still claim LOVE. Even now, this year at St. Cyprian's ... in St. Augustine, Florida ... in the United States of America ... we still claim this incarnation of the divine spirit of God that we celebrate tonight in the birth of Jesus. Because of this, we proclaim possibility and hope ... holy hope. We speak the language of maybe ... we try to live faithfully in the realm of what can be.

Into the chaos and uncertainty of our own day does God come, again and again, incarnating in the most vulnerable of lives and contexts the unconditional LOVE of God in Jesus, showing ... through acts of mercy, grace, compassion, kindness, and justice ... that in the divine economy, everyone counts ... EVERYONE COUNTS ... there are no exceptions.

We live today ... and we look to tomorrow ... with our eyes open. We join with Zechariah and the nameless shepherds in being hopeful for what is coming. We trust in the power of God and the desire of God for change in this world, and we confess Jesus to be at the center of that change and at the center of who we are. Let us boldly speak the language of maybe ... the language of possibility ... the language of holy hope ... a language that awaits and expects incarnation to be more than a date on our calendar.

It is by our hands that the hungry are fed ... by our sharing that the naked are clothed ... by our words that the grieving are comforted ... by our prayers that the disheartened find encouragement ... and by our arms that the lonely come to know the embrace of the God who loves them without condition. Know that you are held in that same holy embrace of LOVE as we gather by the stable of new birth in adoration and thanksgiving, and live fully into that holy hope that is alive in us, as it was in Jesus.

*May the humility of the shepherds,
the perseverance of the wise men,
the joy of the angels,
and the peace of the Christ-child
be God's gift to you this Christmas and always.*

Amen.